

## The Cardboard Castle

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The day was finished. It had progressed as usual: screaming eight-year-old twin boys in the morning, wanting anything but their third-grade classrooms; a beautiful but morning-impaired wife, denying any part in the malfunction of their kids; ride to school, ride to the parking garage by Rock Bottom, ride through the day's managerial duties, pressing on through stress and productivity and dissenting staff. Now Neil was free of the bustle of fine restaurant life, for at least one more evening.

He pushed through the large tinted-glass doors on the front of the building, exiting onto Washington Street. Taking his usual course back to his parking garage, Neil walked past the tinted front windows of Rock Bottom, through which any passerby could see joyous patrons dining at the dark wood tables. No guests had chosen to dine outside today, under the bright red awnings above the windows and the elegantly curved white lamps above them and the sign that screamed the restaurant's name in vertically aligned red letters still higher on the wall. Neil respected that decision; although the customer was always right, the wait staff preferred staying in the climate-controlled indoors by the time late October hit.

Neil arrived very quickly at Indianapolis' very own Monument Circle, which he walked through twice every day he worked. He never tired of the monument, especially in winter, when whoever was in charge of street maintenance would string long strands of yellowish-white Christmas lights from the top of it down to the ground. With the high point of the observation deck acting as the tip of a cone—331 steps tall, he remembered, from the many times he'd climbed the numbered stairs—it looked like a hollowed-out Christmas tree. Of course, it wasn't the season for that yet. The leaves were still dropping from the trees that lined the Circle, scattering across the brick-laid roadway and sidewalks as they were picked up by the wind.

Neil inhaled, expecting the air to hint at snow and a bit of spice from the dying leaves as it had every other day for the past week or more, but he found a different odor instead. When he looked for the source, Neil spotted a man wearing the Colts sweatshirt from the year they won the Super Bowl, layered under a military camouflage jacket. The man was resting against the light-tan-colored limestone wall outside the Sprint store, alongside a scraggly German shepherd. The dog's ribs were showing, but then, the man, presumably homeless, didn't look a whole lot better. He needed a shave. And some soap would probably stifle some of the stink of body odor and cigarettes and alcohol emanating from his spot against the wall. Neil watched a woman in a light blue jacket stiffen as she walked past the homeless man's suitcase, open and with a meager amount of money in it.

Neil's nose wrinkled, gauging the homeless man's troubles to be the result of

poor decision-making, a theory that the presence of the dog only supported. He thought back to a comedy piece he'd read once. *Zero is the number of dogs you should own if you're homeless.* That seemed about right. If you couldn't afford to feed yourself, how were you supposed to fill another stomach? Especially since the man's addiction probably sucked dry all the donations that the pedestrians in their fine leather boots and stylish suits left in the homeless man's open suitcase—charity gone awry.

The German shepherd woofed, a low rumble in its chest, and wagged its ragged little tail as Neil walked past. Its ears perked forward, and it gazed expectantly up at the restaurant manager. He reached into his pocket to feel little metal Washingtons clanking against Jeffersons, Lincolns, maybe even against the tiniest likenesses of Roosevelt. Then he politely denied the dog's begging and continued walking, following the example set for him by any number of passersby on the Circle that day.

Just past the homeless man, Neil stopped on the corner of Meridian Street, electing to wait for the little red flashing hand to turn into a white walking man again instead of braving traffic. He didn't really feel up to an adventure today. Neil tapped his foot against the brick sidewalk, matching the rhythm of his fingertips' impatient tapping on the face of his analog watch. The watch's cogs and gears showed through an invisible glass barrier, the numbers interposed across the surface, the hands reaching for the shiny little numbers as the seconds ticked away.

Neil's eyes twitched with his impatience, flickering from place to place along Monument Circle: the soldiers and angels carved from stone in the middle of the Circle, the individual bricks on the ground, the stranger walking past who could have been an ex-spy in his black trench coat, the old limestone Episcopal church building that had been on the corner forever, the red M&I Bank building a block or so off that rose stories above the tallest building on the Circle. A small swarm of people in black and grey jackets herded into the Starbucks on the far side of the monument, and another group converged on the Quiznos two doors down.

A crowd of faces gathered around Neil, waiting with him for the walking man symbol to return.

Then Neil's sightline was interrupted by a peculiar image directly across the street from him, in the center of the Circle, close to the fountain at the base of the soldiers' and sailors' monument. A woman in a paint-stained woolen hat and an oversized sweater, a man's nondescript gray sweater that definitely could have qualified as a dress, was standing in the bed of a paint-chipped and scratched-up teal pickup truck, unloading boxes. Her movements were quick and frustrated as she withdrew the cardboard from the truck bed and hastily tossed it onto the cement of the Circle's center, piece after piece. Having removed the mass of flattened boxes from her truck bed, she hopped down with all the grace of a penguin, landing unsteadily on her feet and turning to glare at the pile of disassembled cardboard lying harmlessly on the sidewalk.

A few ticks of Neil's watch went by, and the woman dropped to hands and knees on the repositioned pile of cardboard like Cinderella cleaning her stepmother's home after a verbal battle. Her hands formed actual boxes from the flattened cardboard with surprising viciousness. There was a desperate edge to her motion; her movements were jerky, agitated by expectation or anxiety or frustration as she worked. Or maybe the jerkiness was just the cold creeping into her muscles as the season cooled the day's climate. It could have been nothing at all, or nothing more than Neil's imagination.

The digital walking man across Meridian Street reappeared suddenly as Neil watched the woman, but even as all the strangers shuffled past and around him, no doubt irritated that he didn't understand the concept of crossing a street, Neil's feet remained fixed to the brick sidewalk.

The woman couldn't have been any older than he was, surely not over thirty. Still young, but past the age where the whole world seemed like it was against you. Fragile was a good word to describe her. Her hands were fragile: maybe if Neil tried to talk to her, he would have broken her like he broke his grandma's china when he was ten and tried to teach his cousin to swing a baseball bat in her living room.

Neil watched those fragile hands work the flattened cardboard into useable boxes. The woman left the constructed boxes haphazardly around her as she finished out the rest. The sheer number of them that now dominated a portion of Monument Circle was surprising in itself. Neil wanted to know where the hell she had managed to find so many, and why she would have bothered to keep them in that crappy truck of hers. But how could he ever approach the girl, a stranger, with such a question? Anyway, what she was going to do with them was an even more intriguing question to him, and he certainly wouldn't learn that by interfering.

The woman paused when the stack of flattened cardboard had dwindled to nothing, pinning her hands to the top of her head as if concerned about the existence of her own skull or the paint-spattered hat on top of it.

Then the woman lashed out at the nearest box, kicking it with the fury of a scorned lover. Then the moment passed, and she returned to a semi-meditative state, passively observing the mound of cardboard that surrounded her.

In the lull, Neil looked toward the digital walking sign on the other side of the street. Neil began to cross Meridian, but the red hand appeared again and flashed at him vehemently. Sighing, he settled back into his street "corner"; his eyes returned to the lady in the center of Monument Circle and he entertained a mental image of her with only boxes for friends.

Now she was arranging the boxes by size. She had established a system in the outbursts of passion against her cardboard friends: if the box was big, it got a violent kick to the left, and if it was small, it got a brutal thrust to the right. None of them came

out unscathed.

The crosswalk signal changed again before the woman had finished her task, but Neil stood as if he'd accidentally been cemented into the sidewalk when it was laid, a wrong place at the wrong time kind of scenario. He didn't even really notice the businessmen briskly pushing past him, their briefcases brushing up against his legs, or the women who like to look rich carrying their large designer bags in brilliant colors, faces distorted by too-bright clown lipstick. He kept his eyes trained on the woman by the monument.

Her schemes seemed to be growing in purpose and form. She was by this point arranging the largest boxes in an arcing formation, slowly making an effort to bring both ends closer together to effect a more circular shape. Unfortunately, geometry didn't seem to be her forte; it soon became clear that she found her attempt at a circle dissatisfactory and she promptly demolished all of it, wiping her canvas clear.

Next Neil watched the woman establish a rectangular base, five boxes long by four boxes wide. Plenty of room for a child of any age to play inside. In a way, it reminded Neil of his junior high days, when the kids still thought it was cool to go outside and chuck snowballs at each other with only their snow forts available for defense. If only his forts back then had been as big as this one could turn out to be.

On top of each box of the base, excluding the gap in the foundation that represented a door, the sweated woman placed a slightly smaller box, brick-layering style—not quite lined up. The cardboard stones of the walls started building up toward the sky as she repeated the process for first one layer and then another and then another, shifting gears when she exhausted her vertical reach to use the smallest boxes to create alternating crenels and merlons on the tops of each of the four walls, like a real castle. It was as if Neil were watching the formation of a world; he was watching the castle rising and the dragons being defeated and the princess that needed saving. But why was she doing this?

Neil's eyes darted around, and he saw people starting to notice the woman's antics. The homeless man from before was staring, utterly fascinated, jaw gone slack like he'd just seen the bikini segment of a beauty competition. There was another victim of bad decisions a few stores farther around the Circle, a woman with stringy hair, oversized gloves with holes all over them, an oversized coat, a ragged, ill-fitting dress, and a shopping bag in her hand, one of those eco-friendly reusable ones. Then there were the members of the general population, about to fall over themselves from paying too much attention to gawking and too little attention to walking—a lady in a bright green peacoat and dress slacks, a college boy in jeans and a black hoodie with a design from some game like *Left 4 Dead* on it, his college girlfriend in a dress and tennis shoes, the manager at Starbucks in the forest green apron distracted from his work. The castle-building woman was causing a bit of a commotion on the Circle.

Neil licked his lips, glanced up at the grey sky, and before he could change his mind, he cautiously darted through the traffic on the roundabout, stopping a discreet distance away from the woman and her boxes and pretending not to look at her. He could see her face better this way.

Her eyebrows creased her forehead and her tongue applied pressure to the inside of her cheek as she worked, scrutinizing each piece of cardboard with an artist's eye before applying it to her masterpiece. She paused for a moment, none of the tension leaving her body, and released her frustrations by whipping a strand of her own black hair out of her eyes and burying it beneath the edge of her hat. Then her hands balled into pitiful fists and Neil wondered if her fingernails were long enough that she'd hurt herself. She stalked closer to the cardboard castle and glared at it, withdrew her leg, prepared to kick it to the cement, and—

The homeless man and his outdated Colts sweatshirt and his scraggly German shepherd interjected. "Excuse me," he said. She stared at him. Her mouth moved as if she had to loosen her jaw up enough to speak. "Excuse me," he began again. "Do you mind—"

"Yeah?" She seemed less than pleased at the interruption.

"It's really nothing, miss, but you look... Are you okay?"

"Does it look like I'm okay?"

"N—"

"Then I'm probably not okay." She turned back to her castle and flexed her leg again to assault it.

"Miss," the homeless man put in more forcefully, "what happened to you?"

Her kick stopped mid-swing. "What are you talking about?" She turned her glare onto him.

"What's your story?" he asked.

"I don't have one."

"Horseshit. We all have one. We had to get where we are somehow." He patted the mangled ears of the German shepherd at his side, which grinned as only dogs can. He tried to imitate that grin. He must have thought it was reassuring.

The woman rolled her eyes up to the sky and looked down again at the homeless man before her. "You want to hear my story?" Doubt coated her tone.

"Yes," the man agreed. She waited, saying nothing. "Well, go on. I'm all ears." He cupped his hand around his ear and turned his head slightly in her direction to prove his point. The dog imitated the action.

The woman stared at him quizzically for a moment, looked around, saw Neil, who pretended to be more interested in the fountain at the base of the monument, and dropped her eyes to the brick beneath her tennis shoes. Her fists clenched and her eyes closed. Neil's ears perked up like the German shepherd's had earlier.

"I'm not homeless yet, you know. I've got somewhere to go. A truck to sleep in, at least." Animosity. Irritation. Offense. The dog barked and grinned and wagged its scruffy tail. "Shut up, pup." But the woman smiled anyway and moved close enough to it to let it sniff her extended hand.

"Then where are you going?" the homeless man asked. Neil caught a smile on his face too.

She paused. "I'm not totally sure yet. My boyfriend and I were supposed to get a place—I was on my way to his place to start helping him pack up—but that fell through... and now... Damn it. He's my ex now. I guess I'll never know how miserable that arrangement would've made me." She chuckled dryly.

The man stared at her. Neil imagined the man taking in every intricacy of her face, the high cheekbones, clear eyes, arched eyebrows.

The man said, "I'm in the same boat, I guess." He cracked a grin, his teeth crooked.

"Oh?"

"Lost my job, lost my girlfriend, and all I got out of it was this stinking dog." He rubbed its ears affectionately.

She was quiet for a moment. "You don't have a family to go back to?"

"Nah, they gave up on me years ago. I was into some bad stuff in high school, and we had a terrible relationship anyway. They didn't want anything to do with a son who was so messed up. I was living on my own from the time I graduated, but I got myself together before I got through undergrad. Bio major, you know, for teaching. But there's not really any money in teaching, and the economy sucks, and here I am."

There was another pause. "You're a pretty talkative guy."

He chuckled. "It happens that way when no one's willing to talk to you. They all think you're a drug addict or an alcoholic when really you're just a guy without a job and down on his luck."

Neil watched the woman's eyes travel between the ragged man and the organized mass of boxes behind her. She didn't seem any more capable of understanding this situation than he was.

"I don't mean to be rude, but what do you want?" she finally asked.

"Nothing," he replied. "I just wanted to know why you were—"

"That's a lie. You didn't just walk over here to see about the wellbeing of a stranger."

He tripped over his words and laughed. His laugh paralleled a growl from the German shepherd's ribcage. "Okay, well, I... I just wanted to know where you got the boxes."

"It's not important."

"It is to me."

"Do you want them? I was only using them for, um, an art project."

Neil was openly gawking at the pair by this point. His hand in his pocket toyed with the clinking metal images of dead presidents. He took the coins out and stared at them in the palm of his hand, perplexed.

The man's eyes lit up. "Do you mean that?"

"Sure. I'm probably just going to get fined for littering, and anyway, the boxes weren't the point." The woman gestured grandly at the entrance to her castle. "It's all yours, sir."

The man smiled, legitimately this time. "Thank you. I was wondering where I... I needed some of these. Thank you very much, miss." He left his suitcase where he stood and approached the cardboard castle like one in reverence of the Lord.

Neil dropped the monument-admiring act, the coins weighing too heavily on his hand and his smooth leather wallet digging even deeper into his pocket. He approached the castle and cleared his throat. "Excuse me."

The man and the woman froze and turned to look at him; the woman's hand stopped halfway to the German shepherd's ears.

"I just... noticed that you're down on your luck. Would you mind if I took you to dinner? Both of you, I mean."

The pair blinked dazedly and then stared at Neil. "Uh, yes?" the woman said, a crazy little question mark floating around at the end of her statement.

Neil nodded nervously. "This way, then. I know a great little café. My wife and I eat there a lot. I'm Neil, by the way."

"I'm Jed." The men shook hands.

"Corinne. Nice to meet you. And, um, thanks." She shook hands with Neil as well.

Then Neil turned to go, hoping they would follow. They did.

Once they had reached the café, the strange man turned to the stranger woman and asked, "If you don't mind my asking... If the boxes weren't the point, what was?"

Corinne smiled. "It was..." She paused.

Without even blinking, Neil responded for her: "You, Jed. The point is you."